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Unveil the Dilemma: Run Away Children

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Abstract: "Runaway children" is a growing issue. Print, electronic, and social media highlighted and reported many cases daily. Multidimensional factors are responsible. This study aims to highlight the factors responsible behind and to suggest solutions for families and persons concerned. The assessment of the factors is based on the statements of runaway children. The empirical work focused on 50 children aging from 9 years to 17 years. Structured interviews were carried out. The results indicate that the highest proportion of runaway children was due to violence at home, at school/madras, and at the workplace. Punishments, violence against children, poverty, and strict behavior were pointed out as major causes. Soft and friendly behavior, provision of basic needs including education, parents' guidance, violence free environment without punishment play a role in minimizing the incidence. Extracurricular activities - sports, Boy Scout, and Girl Guide are the key at the school level.

Key Words: Runaway Children, Violence at Home, School/Work Place, Socioeconomic Status, Poverty

Introduction

Peace and harmony are important contributors to the progress and development of any nation. In this century, where the world is a global village, everybody, either teenagers or elders, are well aware of what is happening around the globe. Among South Asian countries, Pakistan is going through a very critical time. All institutions such as political agencies, the army, intelligence agencies, social media, civil society and the general public are fighting against inside and outside interference that creates a lot of imbalances and restlessness among

the masses. The Pakistani government is trying to control the situation with the help of the army to maintain law and order within the boundaries. Other than political restlessness, there are countless social, economic, and environmental issues that are affecting citizens as well as family life.

"Runaway children" is a growing issue. Print, electronic, and social media reported many cases daily. Increasing poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, child labor, broken families, and domestic violence are the major factors behind this issue. The Report of the Pakistan Ministry of Planning, Development

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and Reform on 20th June 2016 indicated that nearly 39% (2019–2020) of Pakistanis live in multiple dimensions of poverty. The World Bank estimated that poverty has increased in Pakistan from 4.4% to 5.4% in 2020. These figures indicated that more than two million people fall into poverty. As for as the laborers and salaried class workers, the poverty rate calculated by the World Bank is \$3.2 per day. The report also manifested that in Pakistan poverty rate will be 39.3% in 2020–21, 39.2 % in 2021–22, and 37.9 % in 2022–23. Same reported by the "The News International ."An epidemic like the COVID-19 epidemic created an economic crisis all over the world (World Bank report 2021). It is estimated that during COVID-19, half of the working population lost their jobs, especially laborers and skilled workers. It is difficult for such families to meet their expenses. The World Development Indicators Report (2013) indicated that Pakistan is the most exposed country among 43 countries in ranking having poverty risks. Poverty statistics of Pakistan indicated an increasing rate from 23.9% to 37.5% within 3 years – an alarming and devastating situation (Pakistan Poverty Statistics, 10th February 2014). It is worth mentioning here that in 1998 Pakistan's national poverty ratio was 57.9%.

According to the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, Government of Pakistan Report (2018) literacy rate of Pakistan was 62.3%. It shows that 60 million of the population are illiterate in the country. For unemployment, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics Report 2020 indicated the increasing rate from 4.10% in 2019 to 4.40% in 2020 in Pakistan. Daily Dawn (12th March 2022, Islamabad) published the comparison of 6.65 million unemployed people in 2020–21with, the outgoing financial year which was 5.80 million. The Labor Force Survey (2017–18) estimated the unemployment rate at 9.56% for 2020–21. Furthermore, it shows a higher rate among the females, 8.27pc, than the males, 5.07pc.

A study conducted by [Xiaohui Hou \(2010\)](#) presented a detailed picture of child labor and mentioned that 11 million children aged (4–14 years) are working in brutal conditions in factories. Xiaohui, Hou mentioned that in 2005–2006 “37%

of boys working in the wholesale and retail industries of urban areas, 22% in the service industry and 22% in the manufacturing units, 48% girls who were engaged in the service industry whereas 39% working in the manufacturing units. In rural areas, 68% of boys and 82% of girls joined the workforce. In the wholesale and retail manufacturing industry, the percentage of girls was 11%."

The News International (2015) magazine desk published an article on broken families and wrote, "A broken family can negatively affect all domains of your child's development. The effects of a broken family on a child's development depend on numerous factors, including the age of the child at the time of parents' separation and on the personality and family relationships. Although infants and young children may experience few negative developmental effects, older children and teenagers may experience some problems in their social, emotional and educational functioning". The Human Rights study (2009) watched it and indicated that women in Pakistan (from 10% to 20%) suffered some form of abuse ([Gosselin, Denise Kindschi 2009](#)).

The Express Tribune (Nov. 2016) published a report on "The Street Children of Pakistan." The report estimated that "1.2 to 1.5 million children are on the streets of Pakistan's major cities and urban centers, constituting the country's largest and most ostracized social group. These include 'runaway' children who live or work on the street, as well as the minority that returns to their families at the end of the day with their meager earnings. Domestic violence, unemployment, natural disasters, and poverty are considered the major factors behind the increase in the number of street children". The World Vision has examined the issue of Street Children in Pakistan. The Country Director, Sigurd Hanson said that “World Vision is gravely concerned with their growing numbers. Children are turning to the streets amidst increasing poverty, unemployment, swelling family size and social disintegration seen in abuse in schools, as well as domestic violence, neglect and family breakdown” ([Kenneth Chan: Monday, 11th April 2005](#)).

The above multidimensional factors clearly demonstrate the problems of runaway children

exhibiting a complex phenomenon. Inside the home and outside the home, harsh and rough attitudes and behavior of family, especially parents, school/madrassa's teachers, and peer group, instigate or provoke children to get rid of unbearable situations. Poor living, poor nutrition, poor education, and low socioeconomic status of the family are the factor that contributes to alleviating the reason for runaway among children. The child faced psychological pressure at home. At school, the child faced other institutional problems – teachers' harsh behaviour and punishment. In such conditions, children become vulnerable, unable to resist the psychological and physical pressures of punishment for poor performance ([Achakzai, J. K. 2011](#)). Therefore, children runaway happened to avoid the pressure inside and outside the home. It indicates that "a child needs the proper guidance, sympathetic attitude and problem-solving environment for his successful brought up and capacity building to understand and face the problems at his early age" ([Achakzai, J. K. 2011](#)).

Methodology

The main objective of the study was to explore the major causes of the problem leading to children running away from homes. By using multistage random sampling, out of ten towns in Lahore city, Iqbal Town was selected. Iqbal Town consists of 19 union councils. Out of these, one union council, 112 (Sabzar), was randomly selected, and one registered NGO, "Idara-e-Kihdmat-e-Insanyat," was working for the runaway children. This NGO has been actively engaged since 1998. They registered the cases of runaway children and also got them registered in the police department. The methodology adopted for the study depends on the use of an Interview guide. Fifty children were interviewed from August to Dec.2021 who was caught by the NGO from Minar-e-Pakistan, Data Darbar, and Railway Station, Lahore. The in-charge NGO and the dealing staff were also interviewed to get in-depth insights.

Lahore - is the capital of the province of Punjab which is the second largest city after Karachi in Pakistan. Lahore is on 26th number among the largest cities in the world. Lahore is also the center

of economic activities. It is estimated that GDP was \$84 billion in 2019 (Business Year Report 2020). Lahore is famous for its historical buildings and center for cultural activities. It is the most socially liberal, progressive, and cosmopolitan city in the region of Punjab (Aspinall et al., 2017; Shelly, 2014; [Usha, 1990](#); [BBC, 2016](#)).

Children Background

General information was collected about the age, family educational level, family system and income group from where the child belonged to. The social environment where children live influences their life. Children learn what is happening around them. Circumstances shape personality traits consciously or unconsciously ([Caspi, A., Roberts, B. W., & Shiner, R. L. 2005](#); [Matthews, G., Deary, I. J., & Whiteman, M. C. 2003](#)).

In this study, 70% of children were male and 30% were female. Out of 50 children, 15 were females and 35 were males. The age group data indicates that the highest proportion of children was from the age group of 9-12 years. Out of all, 14% were from the age group up to 6 years, 19% were under the age group of 6-8 years, 23% were under the age group of 9-11 years, while 24% were under the age group of 12-14 years and 20% were under the last group of 15-17 years. Data indicate that the lowest proportion of children falls under the age group of 6 to 8 years.

The educational status of the children, the highest proportion of children, was 'under primary' (35%), the next higher (26%) were 'illiterate' where the highest proportion of children (21%) had primary education. Religious education was (18%) among the children. The overall distribution indicates the highest proportion of runaway children was 'under primary,' more than 60%.

Most of the children belonged from large families of poor socioeconomic status. Parents mostly had "illiterate" or "primary" education. 75% were living in a "joint family system," and the remaining 25% were living in a "nuclear family system ." Most of the parents were involved in the labour work. The family income of (39%) of children was around Rs. 5001 -10000/- per month,

(32%) children's family income was Rs. 10,001-15,000/- and (18%) children's family income was Rs. 15,001-20,000/-, 11% of children did not respond about the family income of their families might be due to fear. Among all family income groups, the highest proportion of runaway children's family income falls over in two groups are Rs. 5,001-10,000/- and Rs. 10,000-15,000/-.

Major Factors Responsible for the Issue

Violence at Home

Parents' harsh attitude, negligence, victimization, physical abuse, and emotional or psychological abuse destroy badly children (Pereda N. & Díaz-Faes D. A. 2020; [Higgins DJ, McCabe MP. 2001](#)). The overall estimation of prevalence indicates 22.6% for physical abuse, 36.3% for emotional abuse, 7.6% for boys and 18% of girls for sexual abuse, 16.3% for physical neglect, and 18.4% for emotional neglect (Stoltenborgh M et al., 2015). Parents' attitudes caused disobedience in the children. Children spend most of their time outside the home and avoid facing the harsh and strict attitudes' of their parents. They feel relaxed in an outside company. Theories "social learning theory" ([Widom CS, Czaja SJ, DuMont KA. 2015](#)), "social information processing theory" (Olsson A, Knapska E, Lindström B. 2020), "attachment theory" ([Dodge KA, Bates JE, Pettit GS. 1990](#)) and "social control theory" (Lo CKM, Chan KL, Ip P. 2019) explained such mechanisms.

Poor socioeconomic circumstances are the risk factors for violence ([Lindo JM, Schaller J, Hansen B. 2018](#)). Poor living conditions and housing hardships are predictors of child maltreatment (Conrad-Hiebner A, Byram E. 2020).

Violence at School/Madrasa

Education always plays an important role in the life of every human being, especially in childhood. The learning process leaves prints on the mind and soul ([Achakzai, J. K. 2011](#)). Parents' first preference has always been to educate their children for a bright future and successful life. Strictness, compulsion, and punishments negatively affect the child's learning which leads to undesirable consequences.

Absent from school, poor school performance, and running away from the school create tension among parents and teachers. The runaway children's responses indicate that more than around 90 percent were those who faced such situations. They are punished not only at home but at school as well. Affectionate and supportive behavior may encourage children's interest in their studies. Lose of trust and fear of punishment shake children's self-confidence and result in unwanted actions.

Violence at Work Place

The survey concedes that among these runaway children, 14% were working at workshops, hotels, garages etc. The reason behind work was the favorable atmosphere and attitude at the workplace which was not available at home as well as in the school. These children confirmed that they do not find torture and are treated with sympathetic behavior at their workplace. It was very rare when they were warned. Due to the affectionate attitude and behavior of the employer, children agreed to continue labor work even on low wages.

Punishments

Violence at home and punishments at school or madrassas were found to be the main factors of poor performance in studies of runaway children. The abusive behavior, beating, pushing, and torturing inside the home and outside the home instigate violent behavior. Results indicate that most of the children (75%) were punished and ignored. Only 25% of the parents gave guidance instead of punishment. At madrassa's, 90 percent of children were punished. Fear and physical torture and ignorance of parents left the only option of runaway ([Saini SM, Hoffmann CR, Pantelis C, Everall IP, Bousman CA. 2019](#)). Of the runaway children who were working on low wages at workshops, tea stalls/hotels, and garages, 50% indicate adverse attitudes at the workplace.

It is worth mentioning that parents' negligence and absence of recreational activities de-track the runaway children. Results indicate that 42% of the children wander and roam around without any purpose which indicates the expression of running

away symptoms. Children 25% were involved in watching movies, video games etc. Such attractions resulted in weak family ties and loss of interest in family affairs. Parents' love and affection, accommodation, and encouragement play a positive role in personality development and strong relationship with each other. Such a favorable environment creates satisfaction.

Poverty

It is the parents' role to meet the needs (food, clothing, shelter, school expenses etc.) of their children. The runaway children indicate that most of them were those who were neglected by their families. Unavailability of basic needs leads towards dissatisfaction. The dissatisfaction with their ambitions shakes confidence and they search for outcomes to meet their needs. Question from parents about the fulfillment of basic needs is considered rude behavior which in turn results in different forms such as scolding, abuse or punishment (physical or psychological) (Lo CKM, Chan KL. 2019; [Higgins DJ, McCabe MP. 2001](#); [Pinheiro PS. 2006](#);

For most of the runaway children, 47% indicated the cause of punishment, 29% indicated abusive behavior, and the remaining 22% indicated restrictions. Negligence at parents' end about the realization of the seriousness of basic needs provision shows parents' failure at multiple levels such as social, psychological, and economic well-being ([Karoly et al., 2005](#); [Lee et al., 2015](#)). In insecure situations, when and where children find sympathy outside home, they share their worries. The provoking responses aggravate the temptation to run away from homes. Studies indicate that children nurtured by fathers feel more secure and develop better skills and capacities ([Cabrera and Tamis-LeMonda, 2013](#); [Harris and Marmar, 1996](#); [Lamb, 2004](#); [Pruett, 2000](#); [Rosenberg and Wilcox, 2006](#); [Yeung et al., 2000](#)).

Conclusion

The present study was executed to unveil the dilemma of runaway children from homes. The study highlighted the factors responsible for the incidence. The significant causes of runaway children came from ignorance of parents and strict behavior, non-provision of basic needs: food, clothes, etc, physical and psychological abuse and provoking behavior outside the home. Parents' affectionate behavior and good supervision – check and balance of outside home children activities and the provision of basic needs minimize the incidence rates.

Suggestions

1. Parents' and teachers' soft attitudes and behavior inside and outside the home towards children help a lot to minimize the incidence.
2. Avoid abusive attitudes and physical torture or harm should be stopped. Friendly relationships and environment always cultivate civility and kindness.
3. Provision of basic needs is essential. Proper guidance is the responsibility of parents which they have to fulfill in any way for their children.
4. The provision of a conflict-free home atmosphere may help in eliminating the chances of runaway.
5. Parents and teachers avoid imposing policies. Entertain child interest to lowering down the intensity of apathy, fear of punishment etc.
6. Involvement of children in extracurricular activities in schools is helpful in creating interest in studies and healthy activities instead of negative trends.
7. Counseling sessions are important to resolve conflicting situations inside and outside homes.
8. Boy Scout and Girl Guide activities at the school level produce good results.

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